

Belkacem Belmekki
Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan
and the Muslim Cause in British India

ISLAMKUNDLICHE UNTERSUCHUNGEN • BAND 292

begründet
von Klaus Schwarz

herausgegeben
von Gerd Winkelhane

ISLAMKUNDLICHE UNTERSUCHUNGEN • BAND 292

Belkacem Belmekki

**Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan
and the Muslim Cause in British India**



KLAUS SCHWARZ VERLAG • BERLIN

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Bibliothek

Die Deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.ddb.de> abrufbar.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.
<http://www.bl.uk>

Library of Congress control number available

<http://www.loc.gov>

Cover shows Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan wearing
the Order of the Star of India

www.klaus-schwarz-verlag.com

All rights reserved.

Alle Rechte vorbehalten. Kein Teil dieses Buches darf in irgendeiner Form (Druck, Fotokopie oder in einem anderen Verfahren) ohne schriftliche Genehmigung des Verlages reproduziert oder unter Verwendung elektronischer Systeme verarbeitet werden.

© 2010 by Klaus Schwarz Verlag GmbH

Erstausgabe

1. Auflage

Herstellung: J2P Berlin

Gedruckt auf chlorfrei gebleichtem Papier

Printed in Germany

ISBN 978-3-87997-377-4

To my beloved mother Zoubida, *Allah yarhamha*,
whose untimely passing has left a deep void in me.

Contents

CHAPTER ONE

Prologue: Muslim Predicament under British Rule	9
I. The Fall of Muslim Hegemony and the Coming of the British.....	11
II. The Impact of British Rule on Muslims.....	13
III. The Impact of the Indian Great Revolt on Muslim Community.....	22

CHAPTER TWO

The Emergence of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Nineteenth Century Indian Muslim Reformer	30
I. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's View of the Causes of the Great Revolt.....	35
II. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Defence of Islam and the Muslim Community in the Indian Sub-continent.....	61

CHAPTER THREE

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Framework for Muslim Modernization.....	67
I. Loyalty to the British.....	67
II. Devotion to Education	81
III. Socio-religious Reform.....	99
IV. Reaction to Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Reform Movement	109

CHAPTER FOUR

The Deterioration of Hindu-Muslim Interrelations and Muslim Breakaway	117
I. The Urdu-Hindi Language Controversy.....	119
II. The Foundation of the Indian National Congress.....	126

III. Muslim Reaction to the Founding of the Indian National Congress.....	136
IV. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Doctrine of "Aloofness from Politics"	142

EPILOGUE

Post-Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Era: A New Context	163
---	-----

APPENDIX

Bibliographical list.....	166
Index.....	173
Glossary.....	177
Acknowledgements.....	178

CHAPTER ONE

Prologue: Muslim Predicament under British Rule

The presence of the first Muslims on the Indian Subcontinent can be traced back to the early Arab merchants from the Arabian Peninsula, who conducted trade with Indians on the south-western coast of the Subcontinent, particularly on the Malabar Coast. That occurred during the seventh century, almost a century after the death of the Prophet Mohammed back in 632 A.D.¹ As a result of this contact, some Muslim trading communities were established, and these communities were to play a significant role in peacefully converting many native people, who were overwhelmingly of Hindu faith, to Islam later on.²

The first Muslim military action aimed at conquering the Indian Subcontinent took place around the eighth century, when Muhammed Bin Qasim (695-715), a young Arab general, entered the Subcontinent through the sands of Sind for the sake of proselytization and expansion of the Damascus-based Ommayad Empire.³ Although his incursion was short-lived, Bin Qasim paved the way for successive Muslim incursions to occur afterwards.⁴ Probably the most significant raids on the Indian Subcontinent were those conducted by the Turkish Dynasty, which took place between the eleventh and twelfth centuries.⁵ However, despite their being successful in military terms, these irruptions did not last long as their primary aim was plunder rather than conquest.⁶ Nevertheless, the first Muslim empire in the Indian Subcontinent, called the Slave Dy-

-
- 1 P. Spear, *A History of India: From the Sixteenth Century to the Twentieth Century*, Penguin Books, Middlesex, 1990, p. 221.
 - 2 P. B. Calkins and M. Alam, 'India: The Early Muslim Period', in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, UK, 2001, CD-ROM Edition.
 - 3 A. Zahoor, 'Muslims in India : An Overview', in *History of Muslim India*, <http://www.indianmuslims.info/?q=node/2>
 - 4 K. K. Aziz, *The Making of Pakistan: A Study in Nationalism*, Chattos & Windus, London, 1967, p. 17.
 - 5 P. Spear, op. cit., p. 221.
 - 6 P. B. Calkins and M. Alam, op. cit.

nasty, was established only till the end of the twelfth century, and that was by Qutb-ud-Din Aybak.⁷ Thenceforward, several Muslim dynasties successively ruled the Subcontinent.⁸ The last to come was the Mughal Empire.

The Mughals were a Muslim dynasty that lasted for more than two hundred years. They were originally nomad warriors from central Asia, descendants of the Turks and Mongols.⁹ Many historians agree on the fact that the Mughal Empire was one of the greatest and the most brilliant empires that history has ever recorded.¹⁰

The Indian Subcontinent proved to be a very difficult land to rule because of the overwhelming Hindu culture of the local population, which contrasted sharply with the faith of the Mughals, namely Islam. Moreover, India was a country where the people of a village spoke a language or a dialect that was different from that spoken in another village that was only a couple of miles away. Traditions also differed from one village to another. Be that as it may, the Mughal emperors managed to rule with fairness and with as little misunderstanding as possible.

Hence, since the founding of the Mughal Empire in the sixteenth century, Muslims and Hindus have lived, though not in harmony due to their socio-cultural and religious divergences, peacefully and an atmosphere of tolerance and mutual understanding reigned. Few instances were known of conflicts between the Muslim rulers and their Hindu subjects. According to B. Prasad, this Muslim-Hindu peaceful co-existence had at its origin the military strength of the Mughal army as well as the religious toleration of the Mughal emperors.¹¹ Illustrating the latter statement, the same historian, speaking about Akbar,¹² stated that “religious toleration

7 Qutb-ud-Din Aybak (?-1210) was the first founder of Muslim rule in the Indian Subcontinent. He was a former slave who turned into a military commander. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, UK, 2001, CD-ROM Edition.

8 K. K. Aziz, op. cit., p. 17.

9 A. Read and D. Fisher, *The Proudest Day: India's Long Road to Independence*, Pimlico, London, 1998, p.11.

10 K. K. Aziz, op. cit., p. 17.

11 B. Prasad, *Bondage and Freedom: A History of Modern India (1707-1947): Volume I: Bondage, 1707-1858*, Rajesh Publications, New Delhi, 1981, p. 1.

12 Akbar's full name was Abu-ul-Fath Jalal-ud-Din Muhammad (1542-1605). He was the second ruler in the Mughal dynasty. He assumed power in 1556 until his death in 1605. Akbar is claimed by many historians as being the greatest

was the keynote of the Akbar's policy, and so long as his successors gave the appearance of impartiality in the matter of faith, the willing submission to the Mughal Emperor was a recognised fact."¹³

I. The Fall of Muslim Hegemony and the Coming of the British

With the death of *Aurangzeb*¹⁴ *Alamgir* (meaning World Conqueror) in 1707, the process of the disintegration of the Mughal Empire was set in motion.¹⁵ This was an inevitable outcome resulting from Aurangzeb's policies. In fact, being a fanatic Sunni Muslim, known for his abhorrence and intolerance of other religions, he ruled with an iron-fist policy and proceeded with anti-non-Muslim policies that alienated most of his subjects, who were overwhelmingly of Hindu faith.¹⁶ In this respect, P. Spear stated that Aurangzeb's fanaticism led him to the extent of removing the Muslim confession of faith from all coins for fear of being defiled by non-believers. Also, courtiers were forbidden to salute in the Hindu fashion, and Hindu idols, temples and shrines were often destroyed.¹⁷

Besides, Aurangzeb is regarded by many historians as being a warlike emperor. It was under his rule that the Mughal Empire reached its widest extent. This was carried out by on-going and off-going wars, which culminated in the exhaustion of the imperial treasury, as L. James put it:

Aurangzeb overstepped himself by undertaking a series of campaigns to extend and consolidate his rule ... They became a war of attrition which stretched imperial resources beyond their breaking point, and by 1707,

ruler of the Mughal Empire, because under his rule, the Empire was expanded significantly to cover almost the whole Indian Subcontinent and the latter became united and prosperous. P. Spear, op. cit., pp. 30-39.

13 B. Prasad, op. cit., p. 1.

14 Aurangzeb's full name was Muhi-ud-Din Muhammad (1618-1707). He was the fifth Mughal emperor. He succeeded to the throne in 1658 and his rule lasted until his death in 1707. P. Spear, 'Aurangzeb', in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Volume II, England, 1973, pp. 372-373.

15 C. C. Hazewell, 'British India', in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Volume I, n° I, November 1857, p. 88.

16 A. Read and D. Fisher, op. cit., p. 15.

17 P. Spear, 'Aurangzeb', op. cit., p. 373.

*after nearly twenty years of intermittent fighting, the empire was exhausted.*¹⁸

As a result, in order to compensate for this financial shortage, Aurangzeb resorted to the extortion of money by imposing heavy taxes on his subjects, mainly non-Muslims. In fact, according to A. Read and D. Fisher, Hindu merchants were charged more than double the excise duty paid by their Muslim counterparts on the same goods.¹⁹ Furthermore, Aurangzeb went so far as to reintroduce the *Jizya*, or poll tax, on non-Muslims, after it had already been abolished by the former Mughal Emperor, Akbar, by the end of the sixteenth century.²⁰

Aurangzeb's harsh and discriminatory attitudes and policies towards his Hindu subjects had detrimental repercussions on the continuity of the Mughal Empire. In fact, Aurangzeb's misbehaviour only incurred hatred from his Hindu subjects, and in such circumstances, could he expect loyalty any further from the governed? Aurangzeb's blunders and iron-fist policy were going to pay off only after his death.

It is historically admitted that the post-Aurangzeb era proved to be the beginning of the end for the Muslim hegemony over the Indian Sub-continent. Actually, the year 1707, when Aurangzeb passed away, the Mughal Empire plunged into a state of chaos. Besides the conflict among his 17 sons and daughters about the inheritance of the Empire, others, mainly those who had been mistreated by the late Emperor (i.e. Aurangzeb), hence bore a grudge against the Mughal Court, found that time was ripe to fulfil their plans. In fact, within the far-flung Empire, local chiefs and kings, mostly Hindus, began carving out their little kingdoms without even caring about Delhi's²¹ reaction, as P. H. Plumb put it: "These chiefs and kings paid only lip-service to the titular Emperor at Delhi."²²

It was in such circumstances that the British, hitherto a group of mer-

18 L. James, *Raj : The Making and Unmaking of British India*, Little, Brown and Company, London, 1997, p. 6.

19 A. Read and D. Fisher, op. cit., p. 15.

20 P. Spear, *A History of India*, op. cit., pp. 34-35.

21 Delhi became the capital of the Mughal Empire in 1658. Before that, Agra used to be the capital. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, UK, 2001, CD-ROM Edition.

22 P. H. Plumb, *The Pelican History of England: England in the Eighteenth Century*, Penguin Books, Middlesex, 1990, p. 172.

chants conducting trade, got involved politically in the Indian Subcontinent. In fact, it is noteworthy to mention that the English East India Company had so far been carrying out trade under the protection of the Mughal Court.²³ Thus, the demise of the latter would naturally bring about the demise of the former. The state of anarchy and lawlessness that prevailed in the region on the heels of Aurangzeb's death cast the British in an atmosphere of vulnerability and insecurity and made them rethink their position there. This *status quo* was the driving force behind the change of mission that the East India Company was going to undergo in the eighteenth century, namely from a trading one to a ruling one.

In a little more than a half century, the British, by means of stratagems and complicity with local princes, managed to gradually fill the gap left by the Muslim rulers by imposing their hegemony over the Indian Subcontinent.²⁴

II. The Impact of British Rule on Muslims

The coming of the British and their civilization that was at that time prevalent in the Western World had different repercussions among the various communities that made up the Indian Subcontinent, notably Hindus and Muslims. In fact, following the Battle of Plassey²⁵ (1757), which marked the beginning of the process of the British conquest of the Subcontinent, the imposition of British rule took place piecemeal. The first to come under it were the coastal areas, where three major port cities were set up, namely Bombay, Madras and Calcutta.²⁶

The British impact was initially felt in such coastal areas, and it

23 J. H. Parry, *Europe and a Wider World, 1415-1715*, Hutchinson University Press, London, 1966, p. 92.

24 According to J. Keay, as part of its plan to conquer the Indian Subcontinent, the English Company often bribed local chiefs. J. Keay, *The Honourable Company: A History of the English East India Company*, Harper Collins Publishers, London, 1993, p. 9.

25 Plassey is a small town near Calcutta. It was in this place that the British under Clive (an outstanding soldier) defeated forces of Suraj-ud-Dowlah, nawab of Bengal. This decisive battle resulted in the establishment of British rule in India. J. Gardiner, *The Penguin Dictionary of British History*, Penguin Books, London, 2000, p. 538.

26 Before the British conquest, these port cities used to be called 'presidencies', because they used to be the Company's principal trading centres, or 'factor-

happened that the people inhabiting those areas were mostly Hindus. The latter proved to be very receptive to foreign cultures. In fact, for Hindus, it did not matter whoever ruled them, and the advent of the British did not make any difference. They had already been used to being ruled by foreigners. The coming of the British was only “one imperialist sitting in the seat of another.”²⁷ Moreover, the Hindus took advantage of the education and liberal ideas brought by the British. According to S. Hay, the Hindus responded to the British presence on their soil with an eagerness to learn from them whatever would contribute to their advancement.²⁸

This attitude on the part of the Hindus towards the British and their civilization brought them many advantages. The Hindus were, indeed, the main, if not the only, beneficiaries of British rule. They availed themselves of the many opportunities that the British offered in all spheres of life. By embracing western education and culture, they became trusted subjects in the eyes of the new rulers, and by learning the English language, they were offered services in the Government.²⁹

Furthermore, it was thanks to Western education brought by the British that a Hindu intellectual class was born. The latter became imbibed with the main principles of liberalism and democratic ideas that were then prevalent in Western Europe and North America. They read about modernism and free-thinking in Western Europe and learnt about Nationalism. That helped them develop political consciousness among their community by organizing revivalist and reform movements.³⁰ As a matter of fact, the nineteenth century witnessed a significant wave of socio-religious reform movements that spread among the Hindus. Probably the

ies’. This was due to the fact that their Chief Factors were designated ‘Presidents’. J. Keay, op. cit., p. 111.

27 K. K. Aziz, op. cit., p. 18. To sum it up, K. K. Aziz wrote: “The Hindus had been a subject race for centuries. They were trained in the art of honouring the rulers. When a Muslim sat on the throne of Delhi they learned Persian and cultivated the graces of a Mughal court life. When a British Viceroy governed the country they learned English with equal diligence and entered Government service with alacrity.” Ibid., pp. 76-77.

28 S. Hay (ed.), *Sources of Indian Tradition, Volume II: Modern India and Pakistan*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1992, p. 173.

29 Ibid., pp. 84-85.

30 O. K. Ghosh, *How India Won Freedom*, Ajanta Publications, Delhi, 1989, pp. 21-25.

best example illustrating this is the emergence, as early as 1828, of *Brahmo Samaj*³¹ under the leadership of Rajaram Mohan Roy.³² Having benefited from modern education provided by Westerners, Mohan Roy sought to reform and modernize his society, that is, his Hindu community. He launched a crusade against polytheistic aspects of medieval Hinduism which sanctioned superstitions and meaningless religious rites that kept his co-religionists at a degraded level. This move on the part of Mohan Roy helped enlighten many western-educated Hindus who were to follow his footsteps in improving the status of the Hindu community.³³

All this was in favour of the Hindu community, which made great strides forward towards nationalism, unlike their Muslim counterparts in the Subcontinent, as will be discussed below. Corroborating this statement, the Indian sociologist A. R. Desai stated that “the pioneers of nationalism in all countries were always the modern intelligentsia ...” and in the case of India “it was predominantly from the Hindu community that the first sections of the Indian intelligentsia ... sprang,” hence the latter became the “pioneers of Indian nationalism.”³⁴

On the other hand, the advent of the British on the Indian Subcontinent ushered in a new era, or rather a dark era, for Muslims. Whereas for Hindus it meant only a change of masters, for Muslims it meant the loss of power, position, wealth and dignity. Indeed, with the consolidation of British hegemony over the Indian Subcontinent, many profound transformations were effected, which disrupted the old order established by the former rulers, the Mughals, centuries back. Indians, and particularly Muslims, were to suffer the most, politically, economically, as well as psychologically. Depicting Muslims’ predicament, J. Masselos wrote:

It was argued that psychologically they (Muslims) had not recovered from their loss of power when they were supplanted as rulers of the subcontin-

31 *Brahmo Samaj* means literally ‘Sacred Society’. A. Read and D. Fisher, op. cit., p. 32.

32 Rajaram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) is usually described as the Father of Modern India. S. Hay (ed.), op. cit., pp. 15-17.

33 A. R. Desai, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, Popular Book Depot, Bombay, 1959, pp. 264-265.

34 Ibid., pp. 276-277.

*ent by the British and that they lived in the past, in a nostalgic world of former glories.*³⁵

Muslims were, indeed, reduced to poverty and destitution as a result of British rule. As the East India Company took control over the Subcontinent, it approached Hindus for co-operation, and the latter proved to be, from the very start, staunch supporters and reliable partners of the new rulers.³⁶ In S. R. Wasti's opinion, by opting for Hindu partners and collaborators, the British were aiming to oppress Muslims as well as create an unbridgeable gap between both communities.³⁷

For instance, to help with revenue-collection, the Company passed the Permanent Land Settlement Act (1793)³⁸ whereby it created a new class of Hindu collaborators, called *gomashtas*, or *zamindars*.³⁹ The latter, backed up and encouraged by the British, overcharged Muslim peasants, even during hard times, such as famines.⁴⁰ In this respect, S. R. Wasti stated:

*The British gave their gomashtas Hindu full protection. So much so that Clive had to admit that the Company's servants "committed actions which make the name of the English stink in the nostrils."*⁴¹

35 J. Masselos, *Indian Nationalism: A History*, Sterling Publishers Private Limited, New Delhi, 1996, p. 119.

36 S. R. Wasti, 'Muslims in Bengal: An Historical Study up to 1905', in *Muslim Struggle for Freedom in India*, Renaissance Publishing House, Delhi, 1993, p. 60. According to S. R. Wasti, the growing feeling of antagonism towards Muslims amongst Hindus was coincident with the decline of the Mughal Empire. Ibid.

37 Ibid., p. 61.

38 It was Lord Cornwallis, Governor General of India from 1786 to 1793, who introduced the Permanent Land Settlement Act. By this Act, the British destroyed the old system of collective ownership of land in the Indian Subcontinent and replaced it with the system of individual proprietorship. B. Chandra, A. Tripathi and B. De, *Freedom Struggle*, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 1983, p. 17.

39 A 'zamindar' was an official person in pre-colonial India who had been assigned to collect the land taxes of his district. After the East India Company took over, this word was used to denote a landholder who was responsible for collecting and paying to the government the taxes on the land under his jurisdiction.

40 S. R. Wasti, 'Muslims in Bengal: An Historical Study up to 1905', op. cit., pp. 58-59.

41 Ibid., p. 59.

To justify the passage of the Permanent Land Settlement Act the Company officials said that they found it easier and more practical to collect land revenue from a few thousands of loyal landlords than from hundreds of thousands of small peasant proprietors.⁴² Yet, these few thousands of landlords were the *gomashtas*, or *zamindars*, namely Hindu revenue-collectors, who turned overnight into landowners. It is noteworthy to mention that the fact that the Permanent Land Settlement Act imposed the system of individual proprietorship, whereby land could be purchased and sold, proved to be a godsend for these *gomashtas*. Indeed, being the *protégés* of the British administration, these Hindu revenue-collectors, by means of swindle and oppressive conduct, managed to accumulate huge fortunes at the expense of the poor Muslim peasants.⁴³ Commenting on this, S. R. Wasti stated that the Permanent Settlement Act “elevated the Hindu collectors to the position of landholders, gave them a propriety right in the soil and allowed them to accumulate wealth.” Meanwhile it “practically reduced the Muslim peasantry to serfdom.”⁴⁴

This degenerative process of the Muslim community in the Subcontinent was not only confined to the agricultural field. Even in the administrative government positions Muslims were being gradually replaced by Hindus. According to J. Masselos, this process of Muslims being replaced by Hindus was set off when the East India Company replaced Persian, or Urdu,⁴⁵ with the English language, and the latter became the official lan-

42 A. R. Desai, op. cit., p. 36. Some British officials confessed that the reason why they created this new class of landlords was that the British administration needed a social support in the country to maintain its rule. As a matter of fact, the Company officials expected full loyalty and support, when need be, from this new class of Indian landlords-cum-revenue collectors, which owed its existence to the British, and thus had much stake in their rule. As the Indian sociologist A. R. Desai quoted Lord William Bentinck, Governor General of India between 1828 and 1835, saying that: “If security was wanting against extensive popular tumult or revolution, I should say that the Permanent Settlement ... has this great advantage ... of having created a vast body of rich landed proprietors deeply interested in the continuances of the British Dominion and having complete command over the mass of the people.” Ibid.

43 S. R. Wasti, ‘Muslims in Bengal: An Historical Study up to 1905’, op. cit., p. 58.

44 Ibid., 58.

45 Urdu is a language that uses the Persian script, which is similar to Arabic script. It was the official language that was used during the Mughal administration.

guage of the bureaucracy.⁴⁶ As a matter of fact, it was in 1835, during Lord Bentinck's⁴⁷ general-governorship, that English was made the official language of governmental and legal business in the Indian Subcontinent.⁴⁸ Furthermore, even in law courts, the position of Muslim officials was steadily undermined as the British imposed their own procedures in the courts to supersede the ones already established by the Mughals.⁴⁹ Illustrating this situation in the Bengal region, T. R. Metcalf wrote:

*In Bengal, to be sure, the fall from power was complete and catastrophic. Cornwallis and his successors swept away the whole structure of Muslim administration which they had inherited from the Mughal rulers of the province. The Muslim ... judges were discharged, the Islamic code was set aside in favour of the British Regulations, and under Bentinck Persian was abandoned as court language.*⁵⁰

Hence, the fact of refusing to learn the language of the new conquerors, as well as their education, served as an impediment for Muslims to get, or to continue to be in, the administrative posts under British rule, knowing that the English education was the only qualification that opened the door for government positions.⁵¹ About this statement, K. K. Aziz wrote:

*The Muslims did not take to the English language, and thus denied themselves opportunities of material as well as intellectual progress. Material, because Government jobs were open only to English-knowing persons; intellectual, because the entire corpus of Western knowledge and learning was shut out from them.*⁵²

In a word, under British rule, Hindus fared better than their Muslim counterparts, and the latter lagged far behind. S. Hay attributes this Muslim degeneration partly to the fact that the areas where Muslims were present, namely the northern regions, were the last to come under

46 J. Masselos, op. cit., p. 119.

47 Lord William Bentinck was Governor-General of India between 1828 and 1835.

48 P. Spear, *A History of India*, op. cit., p. 223.

49 Ibid.

50 T. R. Metcalf, *The Aftermath of Revolt: India 1857-1870*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1965, p. 300.

51 J. Masselos, op. cit., p. 119.

52 K. K. Aziz, op. cit., p. 130.